

THE TIME AND PLACE

The Scarlet Letter is set in the mid-1600s in Boston, which had been founded only about two decades earlier. In 1630 hundreds of newly arrived Puritans established a number of settlements in Massachusetts.

The Puritan movement began in the 1500s among people who believed that the Church of England was too much influenced by the Crown and the Catholic Church. As Protestants, the Puritans rejected the belief that divine authority is channeled through any one particular person, such as a pope. Puritans believed that people had the power to receive spiritual enlightenment directly from the teachings of the Bible. The kings and queens of England did not always agree with the Puritans. When Charles I closed Parliament in 1629 and pressured Puritan members to conform, some Puritans traveled to the American colonies to gain religious freedom and establish new lives.

The colony of Massachusetts began as a trading firm called the Massachusetts Bay Company. The president of the company was called the governor. A deputy-governor, filled the role of vice-president. Eighteen assistants served as the equivalent of a board of directors. The investors, or stockholders, were freemen. The stockholders made up the General Court, which met four times a year to elect company officers and vote on company affairs.

Once the Company was established in Massachusetts, its leaders created a colony. Company officers became the governmental leaders. These leaders had been prominent men in England, and some held royal titles. All were securely seated in the established upper class and were accustomed to ruling. Similarly, the freemen were accustomed to being ruled.

These residents of Boston in the mid-1600s were much as Hawthorne depicts them—hardworking and devoted to their way of life. Their society had been carved out for them by John Winthrop, the first governor of Massachusetts and a resident of Boston. As a leader of the first residents of the colony, he established a government based on a combination of religious and civil ideals. The colony was intended to be an ideal Christian community.